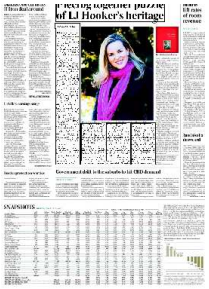

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# Piecing together puzzle of LJ Hooker's heritage

GLENDA KORPORAAL

PROFILE

IN these multicultural times it is hard to appreciate the pressure the White Australia policy put on young people of mixed race to cover up their background.

A book published this month tells the amazing and poignant story of one of the best known names in Australia real estate, Leslie Joseph Hooker, founder of the LJ Hooker empire, one of the largest property companies in Australia at the height of the 80s boom.

Researched by his granddaughter Natalia Hooker, *LJ Hooker the Man: The Untold Story of an Australian Icon*, traces the complex Chinese heritage of the man born in 1903 as Leslie Joseph Tingyou to 18-year-old unmarried mother Nellie, in the Sydney suburb of Canterbury.

It was just two years after the White Australia policy had been passed into law as one of the first acts of the new Commonwealth Parliament of Australia, turning Asians living in Australia into second-class citizens.

Orphaned at the age of eight and brought up by an extended family, which included his Chinese grandfather James Tingyou, at the age of 25 the energetic and determined LJ changed his name by deed poll to Hooker.

He went on to fulfil his dream of creating one of the largest real estate companies in the country, a journey that included recovery from bankruptcy, the Great Depression, World War II, the 1960s credit squeeze, the expansion of the company into the US and a knighthood in 1973.

The publication of the book follows the decision by LJ's grandson Leslie Janusz Hooker to return last year from many years overseas to buy back into the real-estate franchise that bears his name, from Suncorp Metway.

"Grandfather was so keen to keep his Chinese background a secret that he never said anything to his children about it while he was alive," says Natalia Hooker who was encouraged by her brother to research their family history some years ago.

As the book says, both LJ and his Australian wife, Delzie, agreed to remain silent about his Chinese background as he rose to prominence on the Australian corporate scene.

When he retired from the company in 1974, the Hooker Group had more than 2300 staff and assets of almost $200 million. At one point he was Australia's largest pastoral landowner. "It was not until after LJ's death (in 1976) that my grandmother mentioned to her children about their Chinese heritage," Natalia says.

Her revelation to LJ's three children may have been prompted by the fact that a Sydney newspaper, in the mid-80s, was about to publish an article mentioning their late father's Chinese heritage.

"My father, David, didn't know where his Chinese heritage came from," Natalia said this week from her home in Barcelona, where she works in book publishing.

At the time, the height of the 1980s stockmarket boom, the Hooker company, which was then listed on the Australian Stock Exchange, was being pursued by Malaysian Chinese businessman Lee Ming Te.

The company became vulnerable after LJ's anointed successor, Keith Campbell, died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1983, his death possibly hastened by the pressure of running the company while overseeing a major inquiry into the financial system commissioned by then treasurer John Howard.

The Hooker Corporation was eventually bought in 1986 by Melbourne businessman George Herscu, whose aggressive expansion into the US led to the group collapsing in 1989.

The LJ Hooker brand name was bought by Brisbane-based Suncorp, which owned it until LJ's grandson could afford to raise the money to buy back the franchise last year.

Researching the book, which took five years, has been a journey of discovery for the Hooker family, which had always wondered why LJ had chosen the name "Hooker" for his English name when he formally abandoned the surname Tingyou in 1925.

Chinese-heritage researcher Kate Bagnall unearthed the death certificate of LJ's mother, Nellie, who died at 25 of tuberculosis, which showed one Harry Hookin listed as her husband, a name hitherto unknown to his descendants.

Born in Canton in 1887, Howe Hook Yin came to Australia in 1900 to join his father and he eventually became known as

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Harry Hookin and became part of the extended Anglo-Chinese Tingyou family.

Harry Hookin could have been LJ's biological father or, more likely, was someone who befriended his young mother, possibly marrying her after she gave birth to LJ, and playing a father-figure role in LJ's early years, enough for him to want to take on an Anglicised version for his surname.

"Once we got the death certificate (for LJ's mother), suddenly all the pieces came together," Natalia says, finally learning of what she believes is the origin of her surname, Hooker.

The release of the book, lavishly illustrated with historical pictures, Chinese characters and documentation, comes as her brother is now running the LJ Hooker real-estate franchise, returning as chairman, but stepping into the more hands-on chief executive role in December.

"My brother was always keen to get back the company which bears his name," Natalia says.

"It was his name. His initials. It dug at him for a very long time."

Janusz Hooker has lived overseas for many years, including in the US, Hong Kong and China, and he speaks Mandarin.

He rowed for Australia in the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, winning a bronze medal.

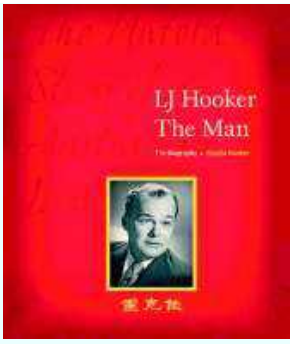
"I had no idea the story would be so fascinating," Natalia says.

"My grandfather came from nothing. It was sheer determination that he did what he did.

"He knew what he wanted and nothing was going to stand in his way. And he faced every obstacle imaginable. There is a message there for small and large business owners. He achieved his incredible level of success by sheer determination."

*The book is self published but is being distributed in Australia by Pan Macmillan. It is available online at www.ljhookertheman.com*

LJ Hooker's granddaughter Natalia has researched the Chinese heritage of her grandfather




The tale of an Australian icon

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